Tangled Action Nets: Community Voices Collide over Localized Climate Action

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Abstract

This study explores *localized climate action* as a discursive-material process in which things (e.g., issues, places, bodies, objects) come to "matter" to a community. We argue that localized climate action consists of action nets-- the constellation of communicative actions performed by both humans (e.g., residents, agency representatives) and nonhumans (e.g., fire, policy). Action nets are performative relationships that make distinctive sets of organizational practices, stakeholder values, ecosystem processes, and physical landscapes "matter" to a community. We examine how residents of a wildland urban interface (WUI) town organize to debate whether to implement or oppose a US Forest Service fuel treatment plan, Fuels II, intended to protect the town from climate-driven wildfires. Findings illustrate how residents' action nets collide and tangle as they debate conflicting preferences to scrap Fuels II and *accept the risks* of living in Lodgepole versus implement Fuels II and *protect town from wildfire*.

Introduction

> "Climate scientists warn us to expect not just increasing average temperatures, but more extreme events and variability as the climate continues to warm. One of our concerns is not just an increase in fire occurrence, but fire that is outside the range of our experience, exposing firefighters, communities, and important resources such as water to increased risk." -Elizabeth Reinhart, Assistant Director of the US Forest Service Fire and Aviation Management (FAM) branch[1]

Talk of climate change is ubiquitous in everyday discourse around the world, in the news media, and on the political stage. While climate change is a large-scale international issue, mired in policy and political debates, climate action often unfolds at the local level as communities enact actions to mitigate catastrophic effects of climate-driven disasters. Scholars from various theoretical viewpoints have examined the complexities that emerge when multiple, interdependent parties come together to solve problems, manage disputes, and make collective decisions related to environmental issues. Literatures on stakeholder collaboration (Lange, 2003), deliberation (Walker, 2007; Walker & Daniels, 2004), and conflict (Brummans et al., 2008) speak to ways human actors negotiate meaning and action, broadly, through sharing, co-constructing, or negotiating multiple perspectives on environmental issues and decisions. Focusing on perspectives at stake in an issue, or specific decisions, directs analytical attention to human cognitions, actions, preferences, and intentions while generally overlooking how nonhuman actors (i.e., the material) actively participate in constructing such perspectives. Yet, the realities of climate change are undeniably material, and negotiating them occurs beyond organizational boundaries. We need a theoretical perspective that captures the "messiness"--i.e., the multiple actants, both human and nonhuman--involved in organizing in response to, and in anticipation of, climate change.

This study is grounded in a theoretical perspective that sees communication as constitutive of organizing (CCO) (Brummans, Cooren, Robichaud, & Taylor, 2014). This study explores *localized climate action* as a discursive-material process in which things (e.g., issues,

places, bodies, objects) come to "matter" (Castor, 2016; Cooren, 2015). We argue that localized climate action is the constellation of communicative actions performed by both human (e.g., community members, agency representatives) and nonhuman actants (e.g., fire, policy, nature), and that these actions cohere into an "action net" (Czarniawska, 2004). In an action net, both human and nonhuman actants—the discursive and the material—interact with one another in particular ways to create configurations of performative relationships that, we propose, constitute localized climate action. This study engages broadly with other research exploring organizing processes by which communities decide: *what will we do about climate change?* With action nets in mind, this study's analytical focus is trained on sets of actions themselves, and is inclusive of who or what acts; we ask: How do proposed courses of action on climate change involve participation from stakeholders, as well as hypothetical and anticipated participation by natural processes, technologies, and objects?

This study proceeds in four parts: First, we examine literature on action nets to explain how they are useful for articulating webs of relationships that constitute multiple actors, and how those webs themselves perform organizing in various ways. We note that theorizing about action nets could be strengthened if emerging work considers how the materializing of localized climate action occurs through ongoing discursive practices. Second, we augment action net theorizing by identifying 'action' as a communicative process. Drawing from a relational ontology, we explain how action nets are comprised of communication events that constitute organizational actors and relationships (Castor, 2016). Third, we advance an in-depth case study of Lodgepole, USA, a mountain community vulnerable to catastrophic wildfire. The mountain town is situated in a wildland urban interface (WUI) in which public and private lands border each other. At issue is a fuel treatment project (Fuels II) which aims to remove a large number of trees on public land

near the town to protect it from climate-driven wildfires. Using a relational ontology, and employing action nets as our theoretical lens, we consider how residents' conflicting preferences to either "accept the risks" of living there, or "protecting town from wildfire" are not just perspectives on the issue. Rather, these conflicting preferences comprise action nets-- each of which consists of performative relationships that make distinctive sets of organizational practices, stakeholder values, ecosystem processes, and physical landscapes "matter" to a community. Fourth, we discuss this study's contributions to emerging scholarship on CCO and the concept of action nets, and we reflect on ways a constitutive communication lens contributes something unique to the many scholarly voices that are making sense of climate change.

Literature Review

As organizational scholars continue to explore the communicative constitution of organizations (CCO), research projects continue to push to understand how organizing occurs through communicative processes (Brummans et al., 2014). A developing strand of theorizing adopts a relational ontology in which things (e.g., concerns, practices, objects, job titles, etc.) are made to matter through interactions. When something is made to "matter," it simultaneously shapes meanings that develop through talk, while its physical features become relevant to interactants (Castor, 2016; Cooren, 2015). The concept of an "action net" (Czarniawska, 2004) exemplifies a relational ontology. The action net is grounded in the idea that organizing, in its most basic form, consists of patterns of connected actions by which human and non-human actors constitute, or perform, an activity (Lindberg & Czarniawska, 2006). The *actions* comprising an action net refer to undertakings such as practices, decisions, plans, processes, and so on, that necessarily involve interdependent associations among human and non-human actors. An action *net*, then, refers to that which connects an array of actions into a coherent activity (e.g.,

an internal logic, reason for organizing, goal, etc.). The action net concept directs attention toward patterns of collective actions, embracing the fact that these collective actions might be performed outside the bounds of a single organization, and that connected actions might be fleeting or inconsistent (Lindberg & Walter, 2013).

The conceptualization of an action net is opposite to that of a network. In a network, organizational actors, with their associated roles and responsibilities, must be in place prior to actions taking place. Action nets reverse this assumption by focusing on how actions themselves connect actors. As Czarniawskwa (2004) clarified, while "a network assumes actors who make contacts, …action nets assume that connections between actions produce actors: one becomes a 'publisher' because one publishes books" (p. 781). Thus an action net consists of sets of actions that link together, reversing the connections between time, actions, and organizational actors constituting a network. Czarniawska (2004) theorized action nets in "an attempt to minimize that which is taken for granted prior to analysis" (p. 780) by focusing attention on "interactions taking place in time and space" (p. 781). By focusing on connected actions, rather than connected actors (as in a network), the action net concept directs attention to interconnected actions that constitute an organizing process (Lindberg & Czarniawska, 2006). In this way, action nets are inherently relational, in line with Barad's (2007) relativist perspective (see also Castor, 2016). A relativist perspective takes an ontological, rather than epistemological approach to examining relationship. In particular, rather than adopting an epistemological approach focusing on how independent objects connect to one another (as in a network), a relativist perspective considers that, through unfolding interdependent actions, humans and objects are continually being positioned and repositioned relative to one another (see Castor, 2016, p. 347).

Czarniawska (2004) originally intended for the notion of action net to explain how enduring organizations and institutions are constituted and stabilized through sets of connected actions. A focus on processes of organizing, rather than starting with an assumption of stabilized organizations, focuses attention on actions and interactions. Emerging research on action nets illustrates how sets of connected actions result in performative relationships that constitute practices (Lindberg & Walter, 2013), policies (Campos & Zapata, 2012; Lindberg & Czarniawska, 2006), fashion design (Zhang & Juhlin, 2016), and organizational membership (Cavanaugh, 2015). These studies describe different ways that action nets emerge, however, two processes describing how action nets cohere stand out as focal in this work. They include translation and knotting.

First, action nets consist of relationships among actions that become connected through processes of translation. Inspired by Latour (1986), "translation can be regarded as the mechanism whereby connecting is achieved" (Lindberg & Czarniawska, 2006, p. 295). In particular, the action *net* is a single unit (net) comprised of the multiple threads (actions) connected through translation processes. Linkages among actions might become stabilized over time, resembling what we may call structures or organizations (Czarniawska, 2004; Lindberg & Czarniawska, 2006). Action nets therefore guide the analytical focus toward both identifying the actions taking place through organizing processes, and articulating how actions are connected across time and space to produce actors, structures, and organizations. For example, Campos and Zapata (2012) described how an action net formed from a series of translations after an external aid organization identified a problem: a rubbish dump near Managua, Nicaragua where thousands of impoverished people lived and worked. The first in a series of translations occurred as the aid organization marketed the dump as an exemplification of global poverty (i.e.,

translating the situation at the dump into a problem in need of international attention). This marketing effort brought attention and resources to the problem from Spain. However, Managua locals and government officials did not see the rubbish dump as a key issue for them. Yet, driven by external political and humanitarian efforts to provide funding, devise a plan for the rubbish dump, and convince local authorities and organizations to adopt the plan (all examples of translations), the initiative to make changes to the rubbish dump, gradually became a local priority. Moreover, Campos and Zapata's study illustrates how power relations influence the selection of important issues (e.g., what gets put on the city council agenda) and that those agendas are actants shaping the organizing process.

Second, collective actions "knot" together to connect what can only in hindsight be identified as an "organizing" process. Knotting involves both translation and connection, or as Lindberg and Czarniawska (2006) explain, "knotting different kinds of actions together by translating them into one another" (p. 292). For example, these authors described how a "chain of care" initiative was implemented in the Swedish health care context. Recall that translation refers to the process that connects the links (or actions) together (Czarniawska, 2004). In this way, "organizing between organizations necessarily means connecting actions separated in space and time in such a way that they together form a chain or a net" (p. 297). Lindberg and Czarniawska (2006) described three ways knotting occurred simultaneously through translation and connection: 1) Cognitive connections were made among health care professionals as they imagined what each other did. That is, care providers observed each other's work (providing a connection between caregivers' work practices), which informed for the observer how other providers were involved in the "chain of care" (a translation of the other provider's role in patient care); 2) Emotional connections were made as care professionals met with each other (a

connection) to share understanding about patients--that is, they translated, or shared with each other their understandings of the patient's condition. Emotional connections also strengthened caregivers' loyalty to the "chain of care" endeavor, which helped to stabilize the connection in the "chain of care" action net. Finally, 3) mimetic connections were made as caregivers linked their practices with those of others (a translation), which created "loose ties" (in the spirit of Granovetter, 1973), referring to connections with people and instrumental resources outside of one's immediate network.

So far, the description of action nets has focused on connected actions among actors. However, action nets are inherently sociomaterial. A few studies have begun to consider how non-human actants participate in action nets. One study conceptualized library membership as an action net, particularly, the product of practices interacting with structures and physical spaces (Cavanaugh, 2015). For example, reading in the library interacted with the physical space of the library; renewing a book online interacted with the virtual space of the library. In both of these examples, connections among action (reading or renewing a book) and structure (physical or virtual space) stabilized into a normative performance of library membership. For Cavanaugh (2015), the library was "an action net of practices in which humans, objects, other agencies, and institutions commingle, interact, and continually order and organize themselves into...behavior and discourse" (p. 423). In another study, Lindberg and Walter (2013) used the failure of a drop infusion pump at a Swedish hospital as an example of how technology participated in altering safety practices, and thus an action net performing health care. Specifically, when the pump failed to function properly, its role in the practice of health care shifted from participating as an operational tool to instead becoming a central object of organizational inquiry. In a further study, Zhang and Juhlin (2016) explored technology through the lens of action nets by looking at the

"fashionalization", or aesthecizing, of mobile phones. Tracing interactions between the fashion industry and mobile design, they argued that the fashionalization of mobile phones is not the result of a system already in place that connects fashion and phone design, but rather, that the "various forms of activities and interactions" (p. 79) between the industries generates a connection that gives life to the mobile phone as a fashion design. Here, Zhang and Juhlin list examples of actants that actively participate in the action net, including fashion magazines, colors, and fashion resources, and design ideals, in addition to such actors as designers and developers.

Following Czarniawska (2004), research on action nets has examined how human and nonhuman actants are produced by organizing actions. Current literature on action nets focuses largely on the observed, enacted actions that form action nets. However, emerging work by Castor (2016) and Cooren (2015) suggest that action nets are constituted through discursive processes. Turning toward the relationality of discourse and material allows us to not only identity action nets, but to theorize how they emerge. Exploring the action nets of localized climate action through the lens of relational ontology (Castor, 2016) is productive because it allows a way to trace what issues are “made to matter” (Castor, 2016, p. 337) in multiparty organizing. Toward that end, this study investigates the material discursive production of action nets comprising localized climate action using the following guiding question:

> What explanatory power does the action net concept have for understanding the sets of sociomaterial concerns that comprise distinctive perspectives regarding localized climate action?

Study Context: Fuel Treatments in a Wildland Urban Interface Area

The severity of wildland fires has increased steadily over the years. Catastrophic fire events are the "new normal" (Brown, Hall, & Westerling, 2004; Flannigan, Krawchuk, deGroot, Wotton, & Gowman, 2009), and every few years, a summer is dubbed the worst fire season on record. Wildfire risk combined with growing populations means that suburbs are expanding geographically into foothills and mountain areas, and butting up against public lands. These areas, termed the wildland urban interface (WUI), refer to places where public and private land intermix (Theobald & Romme, 2007; Ascher, Wilson, & Toman, 2013). The WUI is a pressing concern for federal, state and local land managers for several related reasons. First, the intermixing of private residences adjacent to and within public lands presents a wildland fire risk. Landowners risk property loss in the event of wildfires. However, land and fuel treatments in WUI areas are often highly visible, which subjects them to public scrutiny, and in some cases, opposition. When publics oppose land and fuels treatments, these projects run the risk of being only partially executed or even outright blocked. If land management agencies and their stakeholders are not able to reach adequate consensus about what to do in anticipation of climate-driven wildfire, then important fuels management activities might not happen. At worst, the lack of fuel treatments could pose a significant wildfire risk for residents in WUI areas.

This study follows the re-implementation of a US Forest Service fuels treatment project called Fuels II (a pseudonym), taking place adjacent to Lodgepole (a pseudonym), a small mountain town (population 1,500) situated less than an hour's drive from a major western city. We characterize Fuels II as an example of *localized climate action* because its proposed land treatments are a direct response to the increasingly catastrophic nature of wildfires and their destructive potential in WUI areas, and because Fuels II is an example of a national-level federal

mandate to prepare communities for climate-driven wildfires that is allowed, debated, negotiated, implemented, and/or blocked all at the local community level. In effect, we contend that what we as a civilization do--or do not do--about climate change is ultimately negotiated in local communities like Lodgepole, USA.

The nearly 4,000 acre Fuels II vegetation treatment project was primarily aimed at improving the landscape's resistance and resilience to catastrophic wildfires. Proposed treatments included more than 3,000 acres in which trees would be cut down to either thin the density of the tree stand, or to clear cut patches of the forest, among other treatments. The project was approved through the national environmental protection act (NEPA) process. However, in 2015, when beginning to implement the project--then called Fuels I--the USFS efforts were blocked by a vocal, organized group of community members and landowners (referred to here by the pseudonym Opposition Group) who disapproved of the treatments. Those in the Opposition Group argued that thinned and clearcut areas ruined the forest aesthetic, diminished recreational opportunities and overall quality of life, and negatively impacted property values in the area. The local USFS Ranger District office re-assessed and approved the Fuels II project and its re-implementation in July of 2017; this study tracks the ongoing controversy around Fuels II.

Methodology

Data Collection

Fieldwork for this study began through observing public meetings in January and October of 2016 (see Table 1). We began individual and focus group interviews with Lodgepole community members after receiving institutional review board (IRB) approval in November, 2016. The first author has observed seven public meetings regarding Fuels II. Detailed fieldnotes from these public meetings identified the sets of issues residents raised, noted how residents

interacted with each other, and tracked the participation of residents so to understand who the "players" were in the Fuels II controversy.

The public meetings provided a foundational understandings about how residents, the USFS, and other stakeholders discussed Fuels II. However, talk in these meetings was often highly structured or moderated such that stakeholder views were declared, but seldom directly debated. To gain a deeper understanding of stakeholder perspectives on Fuels II, we identified from public meetings an array of Lodgepole residents who seemed to represent varying perspectives, and invited them to participate in focus group interviews. We explicitly informed them upfront of our intention to bring them together with residents who held different views. Most of the residents we approached, who were already visible to the community and active regarding Fuels II, were comfortable interacting with neighbors they knew held contrary views. We also offered individual interviews to residents who wanted their voices to be heard but were not comfortable airing their views publicly, and to accommodate interviewees' work schedules. Our primary concern in this study was the debate town residents were engaged in regarding Fuels II, because it's the town residents who ultimately will block, allow, or shape the USFS project's implementation. Therefore, our analysis only includes the perspectives of USFS representatives for clarifying the Fuels II project details and its timeline.

Data collection via focus group and individual interviews included $N = 26$ Lodgepole residents (11 men, 15 women), primarily white, highly educated, and middle- to upper middle class. Their tenure as residents ranged from four to 43 years, with most reporting residency of about 20 years. The participants comprised four focus groups, and seven individual interviews. Focus group interviews consisted of key supporters of and those opposed to Fuels II. Focus groups aimed for equal representation from both perspectives on the issue, but residents

associated with the Opposition Group were consistently overrepresented, resulting in focus groups with roughly one third in support of Fuels II and two thirds in opposition to it. The semi-structured interview protocol asked participants to comment on the following: 1) to describe the health of the forest near where they live, 2) what they felt the role and priorities of land management agencies should be in managing forests in WUI areas like Lodgepole, 3) what social values of the landscape the USFS should take into account when implementing Fuels II, and 4) whether and how strongly residents expected municipal and wildland firefighters to protect their home if a wildfire threatened it. Interviews ranged from 90 to 180 minutes, and yielded more than 400 pages of single-spaced transcription.

Focus group interviews are valuable because interactions among participants often cue unique insights that would not emerge from individual interviews (Morgan, 1996). Focus groups were particularly valuable for identifying action nets because they placed varying perspectives on Fuels II in conversation and contrast with each other. Focus group conversations helped us to further develop and gain confidence in our findings about action nets drawn from the observational data, because residents directly debated key areas where different action nets contrasted with each other.

Data Analysis

Action nets guide the analytical focus toward both identifying the actions taking place through organizing processes, and articulating how actions are connected across time and space to produce actors, structures, and organizations (Czarniawska, 2004; Lambotte & Meunier, 2013). The first step of our analysis involved a general reading of the meeting fieldnotes, and focus group and individual interview transcripts. We conducted an inductive, open coding process (Hennink, Hutter, & Bailey, 2010). We coded for emerging content and themes related to

perspectives (e.g., support, opposition, combination views, etc.) on to the Fuels II treatment, and we remained reflexively aware throughout the coding that more perspectives could arise aside from just support or opposition. The second step involved grouping the codes into categories that we referred to as "objects of concern" (see Table 1); these included key ideas, perspectives, natural processes, actors, and objects about which residents seemed to hold differing views. The third step of the process involved looking closer at how residents' perspectives regarding objects of concern were explicitly associated with actions. As illustrated in Table 2, each action net *translated* (Lindberg & Czarniawska, 2006; Latour, 1986) particular objects of concerns such as perspectives (e.g., relationship between humans and nature), states of being (e.g., the status quo), objects (e.g., trees), and actors (e.g., the US Forest Service) into particular actions (e.g., associated with "accepting risk" or "protecting town"). For example, the status quo was an object of concern that, for one set of residents was connected with actions that maintained it; while for another set of residents, the status quo was something that required changing. Table 2 provides excerpts from the dataset that illustrate each action. The fourth step of analysis involved looking at how the actions associated with objects of concern clustered together into a broader, overarching action net. This step resulted in identifying two action nets, which represented residents' proposed avenues for localized climate action: "accepting the risk" of wildfire, and "protecting town" from wildfire.

Findings

"I came to live here to be part of nature ... You've got to understand that it comes with risks; forest fires are a part of this." -Rod, resident and former firefighter, opposed to Fuels II

"We all like our tree-lined road. But we need a new paradigm for what it means to live *here*. With fire." -Val, volunteer firefighter in support of Fuels II

The guiding question for this study asked: What explanatory power does the action net concept have for understanding the sets of sociomaterial concerns that arise around localized

climate action? Two action nets emerged from the data. Each perspective on localized climate action included roughly the same range of related concerns, actors, objects, and organizations. However, the action nets differed in how they *translated* those concern, objects, actors and organizations into distinctive sets of linked actions (see Table 1) comprising two distinct perspectives on what the community should do about wildfire threats.

"Accepting the Risk" of Living Here

The first perspective on localized climate action was in opposition to the Fuels II treatment. The action net comprised a constellation of actions by which residents "accept the risk" of living in Lodgepole (see Table 2). To accept the risk meant to *maintain the status quo* by *"preserving" the trees,* and through conserving the current state of the forest. Jonas said, "the woods is <sic> a part of you...It's part of your soul, in every breath that you experience, and that is worth preserving." Central to maintaining the status quo was, specifically, keeping the trees, as Edna said, "people come from all over the world...to Lodgepole to see the trees. They want trees." The timbered landscape provided an experience of *living as part of nature*, a major reason why many residents said they were drawn to living in Lodgepole, a town many residents under the "accepting the risk" perspective described as "remote," even though it was less than an hour's drive from a major US city, to which many residents commuted daily. These residents characterized their relationship to nature as one in which nature dominated humans; indeed, nature's dominance over humankind was a central logic that held together the actions comprising the "accept the risk" action net. Hence, humans were subject to natural processes including disasters both as a matter of course, and as a matter of choice. As Rod (group 3) said, "I want to live here to be part of nature ... You've got to understand that it comes with risks, forest fires are a part of this."

> Sarah said, "We choose to live in a remote town, some people choose to live remote--at the end of a road. Do we then say that every person that lives anywhere needs several options [to drive] out [if there is a wildfire]? We'd be paving roads all through our community!...If people want to be completely safe, why don't they live in a suburb?"

Residents framed living in a "remote" community as being a personal choice, and following from that choice was the expectation that safety was an individual's responsibility. In particular, residents who *accept the risk* of living in the town of Lodgepole said they did not expect firefighters to save their home in the event of a wildfire. The following quote illustrates several aspects of the accepting risk action net, including the expectation that property owners have a *responsibility for individual safety*, that they hold *no expectation for firefighter help* in saving their house, and importantly, their central concern underlying the action net: *preserving the trees*:

> Anne: Taking the trees out is not the answer to protecting my neighborhood from fire. If the fire does break out, I question the fire department's ability to control or manage it under the conditions that they're creating.
>
> Interviewer: You would be fine if firefighters didn't come?
>
> Anne: Yes. When I bought that house, I knew that this was a fire risk area, and I accepted that risk as a homeowner, as a resident. I understand that at some point, I may have to leave my home, or that it may be destroyed… I don't think there's any place in the country, even if I chose to live in the middle of the city, where I could live where I could guarantee my home's safety or my safety 24 hours a day. …There's always some kind of factor that is a danger. Here in this community, fire is the danger… If it happens that there's a fire, well then that's what happens. I don't want my home to burn down, I don't want my neighbors' homes to burn down. I don't want firefighters' lives to be endangered. I don't want anybody to die. But if a fire breaks out, some of those things may happen and I accept that.

The above exchange brings up a few sets of expectations nested under the notion that nature dominates man. First, the resident expressed an expectation that nature might destroy her home and claim firefighter lives, yet she seemed ambivalent to those potential outcomes (i.e., "[that] may happen and I accept that."). These statements convey a sense of resignation to the magnitude of natural events, and, accompanying that resignation, a sense that nothing can be done to prevent homes from burning or lives from being lost.

A second set of expectations underlying nature's dominance over man was the idea that human alteration of the landscape was wholly unacceptable, while natural processes--even destruction--were both acceptable and expected. Land management activities like Fuels II--

intended to proactively remove trees to avoid the destruction of large wildfires--were characterized as human interference with natural processes, and labeled as "deforestation," destruction of the "carbon sink," and unnatural interventions on forest ecosystems. Residents who "accept the risk" argued that, due to nature's dominance over man, it would be better if the Forest Service left the landscape entirely alone.

> Jerry: There are going to be [destructive] fires. ...There's no fire mitigation that's going to stop that from happening...Your only hope then is your mitigation around your home so the home just doesn't burn when a fire sweeps through. I think we should leave it [the forest] as it is.

> Brett: One of the biggest issues with climate change, is our deforestation of the planet...I look at this Fuels II project as a big chunk of deforestation. That's all I can see it as, and that's our carbon sink, and we're destroying a carbon sink.

To summarize, the first action net--accepting the risk--was constructed in opposition to Fuels II. Accepting the risk meant maintaining the status quo. This action net assembled an organizational configuration for taking action on climate-driven wildfires that consisted of the following connected actions: residents mitigating fuel hazards on private property, the USFS leaving the public landscape alone to "preserve" the existing trees for local recreation and tourism purposes, wildland firefighters not protecting residents' houses if a wildfire occurs, and rejecting human interventions on public land while accepting wildfire destruction if due to natural causes.

"Protecting Town" from Wildfire

The second perspective on localized climate action was in support of the Fuels II treatment. The action net comprised a constellation of actions by which residents "protect town" from catastrophic wildfire (see Table 2). To *protect town* meant to *adjust to a new status quo* through *taking proactive actions* to reduce wildfire threat. As Will explained

> Will: If we're going to live here, then we have to do something to compensate for the lack of fire. We have to do something to restore the health of the forest. So these forests that are not allowed to burn, they're overly dense. They create an incredible fire danger for the homes in the WUI. And they're not healthy for

> wildlife. And yeah, they look pretty, and a lot of us moved up here because it was pretty and we loved it, but I think we have to get used to a different regime. A different idea of what a healthy forest looks like.

Central to the *protect town* action net was that *active land management* was necessary because humans interfere with natural processes by inhabiting wild areas. Therefore, the purpose for proactively managing the landscape was to enhance public safety, as these residents explained:

> Justin: in a WUI area, the forest can't be left to manage itself. We have to actively manage it because we are living in it and because we live there we are interfering with its ability to let its natural processes take place. We have to make decisions about what to do with it so that we can make sure the people who live here are safe.

> Laura: I feel like that's just negligence--to not try [to mitigate fire risks for the community with Fuels II]. We choose to live here, these are the conditions that I accept. Would I rather it be all forested and there's no fires? Yeah. But I feel like it's kinda a choice for me.

Residents who prioritized *protecting town* considered that localized climate action should involve *proactively removing trees* (through the Fuels II project) as a way of anticipating potentially catastrophic climate-driven wildfires.

> Justin: I'm in support of the work the USFS is doing with Fuels II because the goal of the treatments is to enhance public safety. These fuel treatments create places to stage firefighting resources; they make a difference in slowing down the fire; and they set the stage for firefighting resources to actually make a difference.

The idea of *proactively removing trees* was grounded in a logic that thinning those timber stands at the greatest risk for volatile fire behavior, especially timber stands near inhabited areas, would lessen the potential destruction of a future wildfire. That is, by removing some trees now, a future wildfire has less of a chance to consume all the trees or houses, or of destroying the town:

> Erik (member of Lodgepole Town Council): ...if we do have a catastrophic fire, something that starts on the west and roars through town...Not only would we lose the forest that we all love, the area that we love, we might lose the entire community we love up here. So finding that balance is where I keep trying to come up with this and why we keep having meetings.

For residents who were in support of Fuels II, *protecting town* meant acknowledging that their presence in a formerly wild area inhibited natural ecosystem processes to occur. As a result of their interference, they saw that they needed a new relationship with the landscape. They recognized that some of the things that drew them to live in the town of Lodgepole (e.g., the

dense timber stands) needed to change in order for the community to remain safe from wildfires. As a volunteer firefighter, Val, said at a community forum on wildfire risks, "We all like our tree-lined road. But we need a new paradigm for what it means to live *here*. With fire."

To summarize, the second action net--protecting town--was configured in support of Fuels II. Protecting town meant embracing that residents needed to redefine their relationship with the land surrounding the town of Lodgepole, because climate-driven wildfires could destroy it. Thus, residents saw a need to change to a new status quo (or "a new paradigm for living here. With fire."). This action net assembled an organizational configuration for taking action on climate driven wildfires that consisted of the following linked actions: residents mitigate fuel hazards on private property, the USFS mitigates fuels on the public lands near town with the greatest risk for wildfire, residents sacrifice some beauty of the landscape to protect the greater community, local and wildland firefighters use the fuel breaks from Fuels II to help them fight wildfires and protect homes.

So far, we have presented two distinctive action nets--accepting the risk, and protecting town-- that encapsulate localized climate action in Lodgepole, USA. Next, we illustrate how these predominant perspectives clashed in conversation.

Action Nets in Conversation

The following excerpt was taken from a focus group interview that occurred the day after a mediated objector resolution meeting. The objector resolution meeting brought together USFS representatives and Lodgepole residents who both supported and opposed Fuels II. All five of the participants in this focus group were present at the objector resolution meeting the day before, providing a common experience to discuss. The first author also attended the objector resolution meeting and ran the focus group. In the following extended excerpt, residents debated their

contrasting views on what Fuels II aimed to accomplish, and the role of climate change on the landscape. Will was in support of Fuels II, while all the other speakers were in opposition to it.

> Brett: So, what my point is about growth and expansion, if the forester just goes in there and does [Fuels II], that's just another aspect of growth and expansion right?
>
> Will: It's also, you know, it's a matter of trying to mimic the effects of fire where fire is not acceptable, at least to a vast majority of the population.
>
> Sarah: I don't know. I think you'd need to do some work on that and get some data collected on [fire not being acceptable to people] because... I had a sense that most of the people at that [objector resolution] meeting with the foresters yesterday that live in the area that's affected are, they're willing to live there and they know that fire is a possibility, and they're willing to live there and don't want the forest destroyed with the [Fuels II project] that you're talking about.
>
> Will: And again, it's the folks who are anti that turn out. So, if their neighbors don't share that –
>
> Sarah: Well, that's somebody's problem, not, you know—
>
> Will: --but if their neighbors don't share that willingness to undergo fire, okay, who trumps who here? [Ask yourself:] "Is my opposition to change, is that more important than my neighbor's desire to protect his or her family?"
>
> Sarah: …I just want to say that we are aware of fires. We are aware that we all need to be ready to evacuate when we need to evacuate. We always have our fire bags ready. We've mitigated [our private property] because we want to be able to recreate.
>
> Edna: …We did absolutely everything [to mitigate fuel on our property]. It took about six months. We spent a fortune. … So, if Lodgepole doesn't want to burn down, Lodgepole [landowners] better start doing a lot of fire mitigation.
>
> Will: And that's a very important part of the picture, but it isn't all of it…
>
> Edna: If people don't do fuel mitigation on their property, they should be fined.
>
> Will: But, that isn't enough by itself… So, the other, the bigger scale fuel treatments [proposed in Fuels II on public land] could be a number of things. One, they provide staging areas for firefighters. They provide a place where a Slurry Bomber can put down a line, or they can bulldoze, if they have to, a fire line, but even by themselves these are only partial, part of the solution.

In the above exchange, we see collisions between the sets of actions and expectations comprising both action nets. The primacy of *preserving the trees* collided with *taking proactive actions*. On the one hand, residents who opposed Fuels II were so adamant about keeping all the trees intact on public land (i.e., Sarah: we've mitigated our private property so that we can keep public land intact for recreation purposes) that they expressed a willingness to let a wildfire destroy them (i.e., Will: Fuels II mimics fire where fire is not acceptable [taking proactive action], versus

Sarah: No, people are willing to live with fire [accepting the risk]). This excerpt shows a distinction between those who supported and opposed Fuels II: that is, both groups supported fuel mitigation activities. However, the difference was that those in opposition to Fuels II were only in support of cutting down trees around their house (i.e., mitigating), while they insisted the public lands be left intact. Those in support of Fuels II, saw the project as an expansion and enhancement of homeowners' mitigation efforts. In addition, as Will pointed out, the open areas created by Fuels II would also serve other public safety benefits, particularly supplementing firefighter efforts to save homes. Edna and Sarah did not engage with the points Will raised.

The same exchange continued as Brett turned to Will, and steered the conversation toward climate change, its causes, and how Fuels II related to climate change.

> Brett: So, Will, why do you think that-- I moved here in [the '70s] and we never even used to talk about this stuff--So, why do you think it's so important now? Why are we so afraid of fire now?
>
> Will: We live in an area where historically, fires only occurred every hundred years or so. 'Cause we are cooler, we're moister than we are down four miles, you know the lower foothills, where it's hotter and drier. That's changing and it's changing very quickly.
>
> Brett: Right, it is, and why is it changing?
>
> Will: It's because of climate change, as we all know, but the end result is the frequency, the intensity, the duration, the scope of the fires are increasing.
>
> Brett: That's right, it's because of the climate changing.
>
> Will: Exactly.
>
> Brett: One of the biggest issues with climate change, is our deforestation of the planet, and it's happening all over the Earth. It happens in your community. Wherever you happen to live, that's where that's happening. It's happening all over the planet and I look at this Fuels II project as a big chunk of deforestation. That's all I can see it as and that's our carbon sink, and we're destroying a carbon sink just so, it's like this crazy serpent eating its tail, man.
>
> Will: So, [the purpose of Fuels II is to] destroy a very unhealthy carbon sink and try to replace it with a healthier one that has a lesser risk of burning

Repeatedly, throughout the above two-part excerpt, Will acknowledged and spoke directly to the concerns that Opposition Group members raised. These exchanges between Will and Sarah, and Will and Brett, were noteworthy because they illustrated how conversations between those who

supported and opposed Fuels II often broke down. In particular, Will consistently acknowledged and engaged with the priorities and concerns of those who opposed him, and he did this by adopting the frame through which they saw the issue. In other words, Will appeared to see and understand the logic that tied together what we refer to as the "accepting the risk" action net, and he engaged with members of that group by using their logic. For example, Will used this approach when he responded to Sarah's resistance to altering the landscape by saying: "[If] neighbors don't share that willingness to undergo fire, okay, who trumps who here? [Ask yourself:] "Is my *opposition to change*, is that more important than my neighbor's desire to protect his or her family?" Here, he engaged with Sarah's opposition to change, and raised a consequence of it—that it undermined her neighbors' ability to protect their families.

Another example of speaking to others' concerns, occurred in the exchange between Will and Brett. In that exchange, the men employed the same approach on each other. They began by agreeing that climate change was increasing the risk of wildfire danger for the community. Will went on to explain the implications of the risk ("end result is frequency…scope of fires is increasing"), positioning fire as a large magnitude hazard. However, Brett countered by turning the conversation back to the issue of climate ("that's right, it's because of the climate changing"), and Will concurred. Then, once agreement was established, Brett shifted focus away from the outcomes of climate change (i.e., away from Will's emphasis on wildfire danger), and toward causes of climate change, namely deforestation. Brett then equated Fuels II with deforestation, which justified his opposition to the project. Will then countered Brett's argument by reframing the goal of Fuels II as addressing Brett's concern with deforestation of a carbon sink. While it appeared that the two men agreed to disagree, their interaction showed promise that they could see each other's perspectives, and could occasionally find points of agreement

(e.g., that climate change is a threat). Will and Brett's interaction was unique, when considered in the context of the communication patterns throughout the public meetings, and the focus group interviews, because they engaged each other with recognition and empathy toward the other's viewpoint. Common among the public meetings and interviews was that, particularly members of the Opposition Group, tended to assert their perspective strongly; then, if faced with an alternative view, they asserted it even louder or more forcefully. The result was an inability of parties to find the common ground needed to begin a discussion.

In summary, our findings first pulled separate action nets out of a body of data on public meetings, and focus group and individual interviews with Lodgepole residents (see Table 1). The second part of the findings examined a block of focus group interaction that exemplified how the action nets collided on sub-issues related to the Fuels II project (see Table 2). The next section extends theorizing on action nets, by addressing how they tangle together.

Discussion and Conclusions

An action net consists of a set of connected actions that results in a performative relationship (Czarniawska, 2004). This study identified two action nets--accepting risk, and protecting town. We presented a case study of the town of Lodgepole (a pseudonym), located in the western United States, whose residents were deciding whether and how to implement localized climate action through a US Forest Service fuel mitigation plan called Fuels II. Our findings demonstrated how performative relationships comprising an action net made distinctive sets of organizational practices, stakeholder values, ecosystem processes, and physical landscapes "matter" to a community. Further, focusing on action nets, we examined how the communicative constitution of what "matters" to stakeholders in a community function as types of logic repeatedly leveraged in deciding whether to accept or reject competing localized climate

action plans. Thus, when in conversation with each other through community meetings and the focus group interviews, the "accepting the risk" and "protect town" action nets collided such that residents with differing perspectives had difficulty engaging with others' perspectives. In this way, the action nets became tangled.

Tangled Action Nets

Our findings illustrate a negotiation process for moving forward on a contested land management project, and show how action nets collide and tangle as residents engage with one another to debate an acceptable plan for their community. The tangling occurred as members, who spoke from the internal logic of their action net, had difficulty acknowledging the internal logic guiding how other residents saw the Fuels II plan. This study adds to the growing area of studies on action nets. Much of the existing work in this area examines action as it happens (Lindberg & Czarniawska, 2006), typically showing the process of assembling an action net. The present study extends this work by showing that action nets representing proposed courses of action (sets of actions) are discursively constructed, and through talk, these proposed action nets provide the seeds for future organizing. In particular, our study shows how proposed organizational and institutional arrangements are discursively produced as stakeholders engage in public meetings and conversations with other residents to propose courses of action that translate matters of concern into specific sets of actions and organizational arrangements. Thus, it is through the ongoing processes of negotiating *possible* courses of action that ultimately decide how a community will move forward.

Methodologically, our study shows how interviews and conversations yield action nets, too. Moreover, by putting alternative perspectives in conversation with each other, we show how

action nets cohere actions together, while colliding with other action nets. In this way, we extend methodological work using action nets (following Lambotte & Meunier, 2013).

This study makes several contributions: First, it contributes to organizational scholarship that explores how communication across multiple stakeholders becomes increasingly complex in contested issues. Brummans et al (2008) examined the clusters of issues that emerged in intractable multiple party conflicts and found that sensemaking is a useful analytic for identifying the motivations of organizational actors to support or impede collective decision making related to environmental issues The present study complements work by Brummans and colleagues, contributing to organizational literature on intractable multiparty conflicts by moving the focus from organizational actor, to the performed communicative actions that weave together to material-*ize* organizing perspectives. An action net perspective helps us to both identify and unpack the assumed expectations for action already embedded in the clusters of issues. Said another way, actions nets help us to better understand how the core issues that drive localized climate-related debates and decisions can be mapped through communicative processes. Further, a communication as constitutive approach contributes to current literature in action net research by showing how actions are uniquely a communication phenomenon. Following Castor (2016), we put conceptualizations of action net in conversation with relational ontology to trace the discourses that comprise and underlie multiparty perspectives on environmental issues and to explore how those perspectives are positioned in conversation. Finally, given the growing contention around climate change in U.S. context, we position a sociomaterial approach to action nets as an analytical tool that helps explain how positions on climate change, and localized climate action, become polarized and sedimented.

[i] This quote appeared on the USFS Fire and Aviation website as early as 2014, but has since been removed under the current administration.

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Appendix

Table 1

Data Sources

Observation	Focus Groups	Individual Interviews
2x Informational open house regarding Fuels II Host: USFS; 2 hours each	Focus group 1 Will* Jerry Edna	Katherine Mira Jill
Public forum on wildfire danger for Lodgepole residents Host: Forestry researcher from nearby University, 2.5 hours	Sarah Dennis	Phil Justin (volunteer firefighter) Oliver Jake
Mediated objector resolution meeting between Lodgepole residents and USFS Host: USFS, 4 hours	Focus group 2 Rod (former firefighter) Sophie Anne	
Lodgepole Town Council meeting. Fuels II was an agenda item, 3.5 hours	Focus group 3 Mary Willa Laura	
Multiparty monitoring, initial group meeting Host: Forestry researcher from nearby University (as referenced above), 1.5 hours	Erik (Town Council) Paul Rita	
Multiparty monitoring field trip to slated Fuels II treatment units Host: see previous, 5 hours	Focus group 4 Joanna (Town Council) Jonas Alexis Temma Valerie	

*All participants are speaking from their point of view as Lodgepole residents; notable town involvement that might shape a participants' perspective is noted (e.g., firefighter, town council)

Table 2

Translation of Objects of Concern into Actions Comprising Action Nets

Actions/ Connection	**Accept the Risk – Actions comprising action net**	**"Accept the Risk" Action Net - Excerpts**	**Protect the Town—Actions comprising action net**	**"Protect the Town" Action Net - Excerpts**
Status quo	Protect SQ	Jonas: The woods is part of you…It's part of your soul in every breath that you experience, and that is worth preserving. Edna: And people come from all over the world, really. They come to [these mountains]. They come to Lodgepole to see the trees. They want trees.	Change to new SQ	Val (public forum): "We all like our tree-lined road. But we need a new paradigm for what it means to live *here*. With fire." Laura: I feel like that's just negligence--to not try [to mitigate fire risks for the community with F2]. We choose to live here, these are the conditions that I accept. Would I rather it be all forested and there's no fires? Yeah. But I feel like it's kinda a choice for me.
Role of humans on landscape	"We choose to live" in nature, and in doing so, we are accepting that we are subject to nature, and humans who make this choice have personal responsibility for their safety	Sarah: "We choose to live in a remote town, some people choose to live remote--at the end of a road. Do we then say that every person that lives anywhere needs several options out? We're gonna be paving roads all through our community." Rod: You're asking us about the wildland urban interface, which is I think is why we want to live here, I want to live here. To be part of nature... You got to understand that it comes with risks, forest fires are a part of this.	"choose to live" We are interfering with nature. We must manage nature because, since we're here, nature cannot manage herself	Justin: in a WUI area, the forest can't be left to manage itself. We have to actively manage it because we are living in it and because we live there we are interfering with its ability to let its natural processes take place. We have to make decisions about what to do with it so that we can make sure the people who live here are safe.
Trees (Forest mgmt.)	Preserve the trees	Jonas: People ask me, "What an idiot you are, man. You live up [there]?" And I go, "Yeah, because up there, I can be who I really am without a lot of garbage in the way." … The woods is part of you…It's part of your soul in every breath that you experience, and that is worth preserving.	Cut some of the trees to prevent a fire from burning large swaths of forests, and houses	Will: But, if we're going to live here, then we have to do something to compensate for the lack of fire. So we have to do something to restore the health of the forest. So these forests that are not allowed to burn, they're overly dense. They create an incredible fire danger for the homes in the [inaudible 00:22:55]. And they're not healthy for wildlife. And yeah, they look pretty, and a lot of us move up here. And we moved here because it was pretty and we loved it, but I think we have to get used to a different regime. A different idea of what a healthy forest looks like.

Table 2

Translation of Objects of Concern into Actions Comprising Action Nets

Actions/ Connection	**Accept the Risk – Actions comprising action net**	**"Accept the Risk" Action Net - Excerpts**	**Protect the Town—Actions comprising action net**	**"Protect the Town" Action Net - Excerpts**
Fire as actant	Positioning fire as entirely unstoppable	Anne:We all understand that there's a risk that we might lose our home to fire. We're prepared for that. We don't live in a forest without understanding that forest fires come through, and they could burn your house down. No matter how good your home defensible space is, you might still lose your house. I hope nobody's counting on firefighters ... I don't think that they really are at this point, that no, if a forest fire comes through the fire, firefighters are going to come and protect my house. No. People don't think that.	Positioning fire as an increasingly catastrophic threat—proactive land mgmt. required to avoid town devastation	Justin: I'm in support of the work the USFS is doing with F2 because the goal of the treatments is to enhance public safety. These fuel treatments create places to stage resources; they make a difference in slowing down the fire; and they set the stage for firefighting resources to actually make a difference. They are necessary because in a WUI area, the forest can't be left to manage itself.
Climate change as actant	Climate change = human actions contribute to it (deforestation, ruining CO2 sink)	Brett: One of the biggest issues with climate change, is our deforestation of the planet, and it's happening all over the Earth. It happens in your community. Wherever you happen to live, that's where that's happening. It's happening all over the planet and I look at this Fuels II project as a big chunk of deforestation. That's all I can see it as and that's our carbon sink, and we're destroying a carbon sink just so, it's like this crazy serpent eating its tail, man.	Climate change = human actions adapt to it	Will: So, [the purpose of Fuels II is to] destroy a very unhealthy carbon sink and try to replace it with a more sustainable fuel [less volatile fuel regime].
Human safety	Accept risk: human safety subsumed under individual responsibility due to living "remotely" in nature	Jerry: There are going to be fires. I think it's three or four hundred years ago, according to tree ring studies, there were fires that swept across all the states; all the western states. There's no fire mitigation that's going to stop that from happening if there's a terrible combination of weather conditions and so on, that is a possibility. Your only hope then is your mitigation around your home so the home just doesn't burn when a fire sweeps through. I think we should leave it as it is.	Protect town: Human safety is subsumed under community responsibility to knowing humans are interfereing with nature	Erik: And the idea that we need to find that compromise and work together because if we do have a catastrophic fire, something that starts on the west and roars through town, having seen what other small towns, how they deal with it and how they recover from it, or timber, I'm not sure we would. Not only would we lose the forest that we all love, the area that we love, we might lose the entire community we love up here. So finding that balance is where I keep trying to come up with this and why we keep having meetings.
The USFS	Positioned as lacking local knowledge	There's always this attitude that we gone over the 30 years that I've been here of, "well, we're the forest managers and we know about this stuff and you just live here." And our thought is… you may know something about forestry, but you don't really know about this forest.	Positioned as needed partner to protect town	(mayor quote—we don't want to turn our backs on the forest service)